

Choosing the Right Cat For Your Family

"There is no more important a decision than the decision to adopt and assume the responsibility for another life. That decision carries an obligation to nurture that life--to give it love--to care for it."

Roger Caras, ASPCA

Before adopting a cat, consider carefully the commitment you are making. Indoor cats generally live to be 15-20 years old. Be honest with yourself. Is your living situation stable enough to accommodate a pet for this period of time? Animal shelters are filled with pets that were surrendered because the owners had to move and couldn't take their pets with them. It's difficult to find good homes for adult cats.

There are also financial considerations... it is estimated that the cost of care for one cat for 1 year is \$500+. It is unfair to the cat to take it into the family for awhile, only to give it up when there is not enough money to pay for food, litter, or vet bills.

There's a time commitment. Cats are often portrayed as low-maintenance pets requiring little time and little attention. The truth is that cats are the most intelligent of all our domestic animals and they need a stimulating environment in which to thrive. They also form emotional attachments to their owners and can suffer separation anxiety when the owner is away. Bored and lonely cats manifest their unhappiness and stress in a variety of ways such as over-grooming (licking their fur off), over-eating, destructive scratching problems, house soiling, and depression.

A thoughtfully considered decision to adopt a cat or kitten can result in a long-term, mutually rewarding relationship, but an unwise, spur-of-the-moment decision spells h-e-a-r-t-b-r-e-a-k for family and feline.

Everybody loves kittens! They're adorable--soft and fluffy, adventuresome and playful, comical and crazy. They are irresistible, but a kitten may not be the right choice for you. Even long-time cat owners sometimes forget that having a kitten in the house is much like inviting a toddler to live with you. Suddenly your home becomes a feline Disneyland. From the kitten's point-of-view everything is created for his enjoyment. Curtains are made for climbing (as are legs--with or without pants), cords and wires are made for batting at and chewing on, everything is meant for tasting, and moving targets (including feet and ankles) are made for pouncing on and biting. Does adopting a kitten still sound like fun?

If the answer is affirmative and you are willing to kitten-proof your house, then a kitten may be a good choice for you. The kitten will be healthier and happier if he has a playmate, so get two! Believe it or not, there will be less wear and tear on your house and on you if your kitten has a friend to chase around. Kittens that enjoy playing with each other quickly learn to control their playful aggression. Bite too hard and you lose your

playmate--a valuable lesson and one that you will appreciate when they get their grown-up teeth.

The goofy kitten stage is short-lived, at six months Kitty is looking like, and acting in many ways like, an adult. For some people the best idea is to by-pass the kitten stage all together and to adopt an adult.

If there is an elderly person living in your home or a child under the age of five, an adult cat, rather than a kitten, is the better choice for your family. Kittens have a way of getting under foot and their playful attacks can easily pierce the skin of a senior citizen. They learn to retract their claws and to inhibit their biting as they mature, but until that time, Grandma and Junior can sustain considerable damage.

Small children can pose a substantial threat to the health and well-being of the kitten as well. Naturally children want to pick up and hold the only living creature that they've met that is smaller than they are. When the kitten squirms to get away, they squeeze harder to keep the kitten in their arms. The kitten may sustain internal injuries and the child may be bitten or scratched. Constant supervision is necessary to prevent such tragedies.

Families with small children would be better off selecting an adult, neutered male with a laid-back personality for their family pet. Males generally tolerate handling better than females and if the cat is over 18 months old, the personality and temperament are already well established--"what you see is what you get". Often pet owners adopt a friendly, cuddly, kitten only to discover that as the youngster matures, the personality may also change (due to the influence of the father's genes).

In a survey conducted by the Massachusetts SPCA 40% of the respondents chose not to adopt an older pet because they felt that it couldn't be trained. This is an unfortunate misconception because many older pets are already well socialized and have had some good training. Even those who haven't can be very responsive to behavior modification techniques.

If you already have a resident cat it is important to take this cat's personality and activity level into consideration before selecting a feline companion. If you are too casual about this important decision, your house may become a war zone. Keep the following guidelines in mind when selecting your next family member. Remember that they are only guidelines and that there are occasional exceptions to the rule.

- If you have an adult female who has been an "only" cat for some time, it is best to get a younger female. Males, even friendly ones, can over-power and frighten females. Male kittens, while more easily dominated by the female, still grow up to be rambunctious teenagers that engage in a style of play that involves pounce and wrestle (not a female's idea of fun).
- If a young, active male is your family pet, he would really enjoy having a male buddy who shares his enthusiasm for vigorous play.

- A laid-back, older (neutered) male cat may enjoy "mothering" a kitten--male or female. They usually make better mother substitutes than spayed females. Females, in general, are less accepting of newcomers.
- Males tend to bond with each other unless both have dominant personalities. (A dominant cat engages in a lot of rubbing--scent marking--behavior, likes to rest in high places (for surveillance purposes) and in doorways (to control the entrance to certain rooms), and shows little or no fear.

Whatever the combination, a slow, systematic introduction process will help to ensure that the resident cat and the newcomer will eventually share the house amicably.

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